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SHOULD RECENT EUROPEAN HISTORY HAVE A PLACE IN
THE COLLEGE CURRICULUM?

BY

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The object of this paper is largely controversial. I do not anticipate any radical changes resulting from its presentation, but by uttering a word of dissent I should like to disturb somewhat, if I may, the complacency with which historical students have placed the events of the last thirty years outside the limits of serious historical study. No propositions in history would seem to be more certainly demonstrable than these: First, that the events of these thirty years are not within the scope of historical treatment; secondly, that in consequence no self-respecting historical writer would concern himself with the problems which these years have to offer; and thirdly, that no teacher who pretends to take a scientific view of historical development would consider himself justified in attempting to deal with the subject. Are these propositions either scientifically or practically sound?

The chief reasons commonly alleged in support of these propositions are as follows: In the first place it is said that the year 1870 marks the close of a clearly defined historical period, one in which a specific set of issues was worked out; that the years since that time are but the first part of an epoch the end of which is not in sight and the characteristic features of which are at present so vague as to defy exact definition; and that this incompleteness renders such a period practically unavailable for historical study and presentation. In the second place, it is said that the material for such study is at present of such a character as to make scientific examination impossible; that much of it is ephemeral, partaking of the nature of newspaper literature, while the real evidence upon which sound conclusions only can be based is still locked

up in secret archives, there to remain until the various governments see fit to make it public. In the third place, the objection is raised that these years are too close to give us the proper perspective for even a narrative history and much more for an exposition which aims to explain as well as to record facts, inasmuch as the great problems are scarcely defined and only dimly perceived. And, in the last place, the contention is made that as the majority of those who would exploit this period have lived through the years they are studying, they are bound to be influenced unduly by prejudice and partisan feeling, and, therefore, to be incompetent to present fairly and judicially the evidence at hand.

Each of these objections is weighty, and each has a large foundation of truth upon which to rest. Each is sufficient to render futile any attempt to write of scientific purpose with a view to finality of treatment the history of any one of the European states since 1870, or to determine with precision the problems with which the historian of the future will have to grapple in dealing with the last thirty years of the nineteenth century. We do not know and we can not know what is the final word that posterity will pronounce upon this period of history, and while we can see dimly the nature of the problems with which present society is wrestling we can not determine their proportions, nor can we, with any certainty, forecast their solution. With such an attempt to treat recent history I have nothing to do. The question I would discuss is as to whether recent European history should be made the subject of historical study, particularly in college classes.

In the first place, what is the purpose and end of all historical study and investigation? Is it to train men in powers of criticism and insight; is it to make them more reasonable, cautious, and impartial; is it to awaken the imaginative faculty and render the human mind more competent to interpret truly the thoughts and actions of past generations of men? All these certainly are among the objects to be attained; but are these the only and final objects sought? I think not. The training of men's minds is itself not an end; it is the shaping of a more perfect instrument for the accomplishment of a further work. The more perfect instrument will fashion a more perfect product; the trained mind will produce the more accurate rendering of a past movement or series of move-

ments, but it is the more accurate rendering that is the end, and not the training that has made such rendering possible. Again, is such accurate interpretation of a phase of past history the end and highest purpose of historical study? A student by minute and special investigation, by the employment of accepted canons of criticism, by a truer appreciation of the motives which have actuated men and of the times in which they have lived, may bring forth a monograph upon a particular subject, may rewrite the history of a whole epoch, or may view from a new standpoint the whole of a nation's career. Are each or all of these the end sought, or is each but a means to the accomplishment of something greater still? Do students of to-day recognize no higher aim than the production of the article, the monograph, or the book upon a particular subject? I think that they do. I think that the discovery of truth and the elimination of error, which is the essence and soul of all special historical investigation, is but the preparing of material to be employed in the production of something greater and more comprehensive. The historical world needs the trained and methodical mind; it needs criticism and insight; it needs the exact fact and the honest interpretation, but it needs them for that philosophical synthesis of history, the summing up of all that history is and history means, which, as was said by the first president of this association at its first meeting, is "the highest effort and noblest result toward which these special historical investigations lead."

Now, admitting that historical training and method, historical criticism and minute investigation, are but means to the attainment of this higher end, it is necessary that we determine more exactly what form this historical synthesis should take, and its relation to our subject. Such synthesis is not merely a general history of the world, else the highest end and purpose would be a mere grouping of facts, and our interest in it would be the mere acquiring of information. The object of historical study is not the obtaining of an encyclopedic knowledge of facts. Nor is such synthesis the coordination and correct interpretation of any one set of facts relating to a given subject. The highest end and purpose of history is not to explain the development of political history, nor yet of constitutional, legal, administrative, religious, social, or eco-

conomic history. Each of these is but a part of a larger whole.

Professor Burgess has concisely and accurately formulated the categories according to which we are to determine the form that the historical synthesis is to take. First, continuity in time; but that is not enough. Secondly, the relation of cause and effect; but that is not enough. Thirdly, the relation of cause and effect, plus the increment of progress. The highest end and purpose of history is, therefore, the synthesis of those facts and phases of history that mark the progressive development of the human spirit. There are histories of nations and states, of institutions and constitutions, but above and over all is History which takes from each those particulars that have made for progress and weaves them into a nobler sequence. We study the Orient, Greece and Rome, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and Reformation, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the French Revolution and the nineteenth century, in each case for its own sake, but still more in order to determine the part that each has played in producing institutions and ideas destined to shape the civilization of the ages that were to follow. Each period and epoch of history looks back to that which has gone before, and forward to that which comes after; and the character of each is determined not by any one feature, political, religious, or other, but by that one or those several which in that period have done most to expand the human mind and enlarge the human capacity.

But this view of the subject, which is the only logical view, and, therefore, the only scientific one—for history is a science because it is capable of logical treatment—demands that we ask one more question: If we study each epoch for the sake of the light it throws upon that which is to follow, and value the information acquired in proportion to its importance in explaining progress, what is the final goal toward which we are moving? It is inevitably and logically the better understanding of the civilization of the present century, of the present day. There is no possible stopping point short of the present, for all history has been leading up to this, and in the highest sense of our science we study the past that we may better understand the present; not by making historical parallels or in framing arguments drawn from the careers of past

nations, but by tracing line by line and sequence by sequence the gradual unfolding of this development of human ideas and human institutions. It is only in this way that we can understand what we have and what we are. Logically the history of the nineteenth century is the culmination of all history; and if one phase of that history was finished in 1870 we must still say, if we would not have our synthesis shamefully incomplete, that we study the period from 1789 to 1870 in order to understand better the character of the unfinished era in which we are now living.

In view of this fact that the last thirty years are the most important years in all history and the logical goal toward which all historical study is directed, are the objections which have been raised sufficient to warrant the widely defended neglect of these years in the college curriculum? I do not think so. Two of these objections are supported by the argument of incompleteness—in one case the incompleteness of the era itself; in the other, the incompleteness of the evidence. But an argument based on the incompleteness of the evidence is dangerous, for it can be raised against half the periods of history. No student of recent events could possibly err so frequently as did Kemble in his history of the institutions of the Anglo-Saxons; nor would he deliberately reject whole groups of evidence as did Niebuhr when he refused to use inscriptions, or Hume when he refused to examine newly discovered papers bearing on the history of the Stuarts. There is plenty of material accessible for a study of the history of Europe since 1870, and it is by no means ephemeral, but official and reliable. Let it be granted, however, that the knowledge to be obtained would be incomplete. Is that a sufficient reason why the students who are graduated from our colleges should be kept in ignorance of the most important era in history? The work to be performed by the college is not professional; it is educational. Fifty years ago the cry was that too much time was spent on the history of those "brave men who lived before Agamemnon," and that the student knew more of Marathon and Herodotus, Sphacteria and Thucydides, Cannæ and Polybius than he did of Napier and the Peninsular war, the reform acts, or the unity of Germany. I venture to think that the average reader, whether in college or out of it, finds his darkest ages to be

those years since 1870, and even it may be those since 1814, and that, too, in the face of the fact that he is a reader of newspapers and a commentator upon current events. Is it any argument at all that the student should remain in darkness because the light that can be thrown be confessedly fitful and uncertain?

But two stronger arguments remain to be examined. First, that these events are too close to us to be seen in their true proportions; and, secondly, that even if we attempted to interpret them the version would be either perfunctory or biased. To the first objection I would answer, that if the point of view be that of to-day and the glance be backward, then the range is too close and the perspective will be destroyed. But no historical instructor or scholar studies his history backward. I am presenting no brief for "current-events" classes or for courses in the study of modern problems; I am simply urging that the historical continuity which we study in the past be extended to its logical conclusion, and that is down to the present day. History has provided the proper range, and those events which seem confused and amorphous as we look back at them from the present will be found to take on an intelligent and orderly arrangement when approached from the standpoint that history itself has provided—the standpoint of the past. Now, the historical instructor who knows his business teaches general history to 1870 with his glance always forward; why, then, should he change his point of view in considering the history since that time? He may not be a prophet in his diagnosis of the future, for history forbids prophecy, but he will be far better equipped by his knowledge of what problems have been solved in the past to trace the growing importance of those which are becoming the problems of the future. He may see the tendencies dimly, but is it not a gain if he see them at all? Why should the student who leaves college to enter into the world of affairs be left stranded at the years 1870 or 1878 and never be brought to see that which he ought above all things to know, the connection between the Europe of yesterday and the Europe of to-day? The knowledge that he has obtained of the history of the past will fail of its highest value if he be not given this last connecting link.

And now one word about the last objection. We are told

that the treatment of the history of so recent a period must of necessity be one sided and biased. I think that this would be true were the history written by one who has been an active participant in the affairs of the period. But we are also told that such an one ought to do the work; that he who knows diplomacy from the inside, who has sat in legislative chambers, has led troops in battle, or has been a banker, a merchant, or an employer of labor is more competent than the student to write of these things. I believe that there is a fallacy here somewhere, and that unless such persons be trained historians first and men of affairs afterwards they will produce very poor histories. Grote was a banker, Hodgkin, Seebohm, and Lubbock are such still, but we do not trace to that training the excellence of the historical work that each has done. Sybel was for years a member of the Prussian Landtag, but there is no special reason to believe that his historical work owes its high character to the experiences there gained. Gardiner has never held political office, Firth has never been a soldier. That great scholar who has done more for the history of English law than any man living or dead was unable to succeed as a legal practitioner. The best history of the speaker has been written by a woman; and one of the leading authorities upon the battle of Waterloo and the battles of the civil war, whose name stands high abroad as well as at home, never saw a battle or heard a shot fired. That which is true of the past is also true of the present. The writer upon current history need not be and ought not to be a man of affairs. The historical lumber room is full of books; I do not refer to memoirs and recollections, but to historical treatises, which have been written by men who have mistaken their calling. But suppose that that worm, the mere student, the impartial investigator, should give his presentation a twist, would he be doing more than have scores of writers of past times, whose works are standards to the uncritical public—Macaulay, Hume, Froude, even our own Bancroft? Such twist it is the business of the college instructor, if he do his work as he ought, to unwind, that all the strands may be straight.

I have been endeavoring to show thus far that in failing to instruct students in the history of the last thirty years the college has not fulfilled one of its most important functions.

My argument has thus far concerned what is the scientific—that is, logical—demand of the subject, against which no sound objections can be raised. Let me view the subject from the strictly utilitarian standpoint, from the standpoint of the college's educational obligations. The aim of college instruction in history is neither to produce trained historians nor to impart mere information. It is to equip men with habits of thought that we may call scientific, and with an apparatus of knowledge which will have some bearing on the practical sides of life. Every man, whatever be his profession, has an interest in the world in which he is living, and in this country a growing interest in the affairs of the world across the sea. The American is losing his provinciality and is becoming, in the range of his intellectual interests, a cosmopolite. He must know not only the history of the country of which he is a citizen but also the history of those countries whose careers are becoming year by year of greater and greater importance to him. There never was a time, because of the changing material conditions under which we are living, because of rapid communication and transportation, and, above all, because of the changing relations into which this country is entering with the countries of the Old World, when the need to know and the desire to know what the Old World is doing and why it is doing it was greater than it is to-day. Yet in the presence of this fact we are told that though history may be a science and deserving of study and logical treatment up to the year 1870, it is after that date a mere handicraft to be learned, not under the guidance of a competent instructor, but in that worst of practitioner's offices for such a subject, the world of experience. Up to 1870 history may be scientifically treated, after 1870 information regarding it must be got by any haphazard method that happens to be at hand. The student must learn this history from the newspapers, confessedly incomplete and partisan; from editorials written to support a policy, or from magazine articles written to defend a cause. He is to be given no training in the interpretation of recent history, no warning against the dangers of hasty judgments, no word of caution concerning the equal danger of ultra conservatism. The student is taught to feel that he has left his real history behind him with the year 1870, and that what he has learned of history

in college has only a remote and not very tangible connection with affairs of to-day. I would not urge that the college instructor use his history as does the Prussian schoolmaster, to arouse a spirit of patriotism and of loyalty to his country. That is well enough, it may be, but it is not the true purpose of history. The college should make it possible for the student to read his newspaper with intelligence, to bring to his reading that attitude of skeptical reserve which will enable him to judge slowly and reasonably; to bring to his reading that knowledge of the events of the last century, of the last decade, of the last year, and it may be of yesterday, which will enable him to determine what issues are vital and what are only incidental, to strike at the heart of a question and not to be misled by multiplicity of details. The newspaper of to-day—and I mean not only the daily, but the weekly, the monthly, and the quarterly—is often a trap for the unwary, and the amount of unintelligent comment upon current events is a characteristic of our present intellectual activity. And in such unintelligent comment there is a great waste of mental ability that ought to be better directed.

Here is the field in which historical instruction in colleges can perform a practical and utilitarian work by virtue of which history will be able to defend its right to be considered a subject of real and immediate value to the unprofessional student. I do not mean by this that an instructor should become the exploiter of every new issue that arises, or should pose as an authority upon technical questions of international or public law. Far from it. I mean that in studying the past he should bring his tale of progress down to the present in such a fashion that the student will have the suitable historical background which the majority of the readers of to-day do not possess. College instruction should show not only the work of the French Revolution and its outworking in the first seven decades of the nineteenth century, but it should show the changing conditions, political, social, and economic, under which we have entered upon the new era. And it should go on to trace in unbroken sequence the chief tendencies of the present so far as an honest and impartial study of the material can disclose them. In such an exposition mistakes will undoubtedly be made, but they will not be comparable with the errors of judgment that are made every

day in the newspaper editorial columns, and the hastily written magazine articles that are at the present time to the average man the chief source of information. College instruction should, so far as the practical difficulties that lie in the way can be overcome, act as a corrective to this, and the more completely this can be done the more completely will the college have fulfilled the task which the subject imposes upon it. Historical instruction will also have justified its practical character, creating real values for the student and preparing him for a more intelligent understanding of the events in the issues of which he may be called upon to take part. And furthermore the college in so doing will have prepared the way for that school of diplomacy of which this country stands so greatly in need.

The conclusion that may be drawn from this is as follows: Were European history of the last thirty years made the final stage in a course of modern history, beginning, let us say, with the French Revolution, or, if time allowed, even with the Renaissance and Reformation, the college graduate would face the world better able to understand the great events occurring in it, and at the same time better able to appreciate at their true value the unwieldy commentaries and statements with which he is daily confronted in the press. The French Republic would not fall so often before the man on horseback; the decline and fall of the British Empire, after the fashion of old Rome, would not be so often foretold; Italy would not be so often threatened with utter collapse; Austria-Hungary would not so often break up into fragments; the struggles of the lesser states—Norway, Belgium, Spain, and the Danubian principalities—would take on more orderly and intelligent form; and war, that frequently recurring universal war, would be more commonly discounted on its appearance in newspaper headlines. And, lastly, and perhaps most important of all, were a sounder knowledge possessed of the historical tendencies of the century in America and England as well as in the continental States, there would be, I venture to believe, among those of the next generation who have received their college training in this, fewer jingoes on one side and doctrinaires on the other.

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